

ISLAM IS NOT INDUCED BY FORCE

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Many Western writers continue to hold a false belief handed down from the Middle Ages that Islam is a religion that gained ground through force. Among these writers are the English Walter Scott (1771-1832), the French Jean Jacques Rousseau (1778-1812) and the Italian Giovanni Paolo Marana (1642-93). Walter Scott gives this conventional Western view of Islam in his novel *The Talisman* (1825) when he claims that Muslims are "fanatical savages, who had burst from the centre of Arabian desert, with the saber in one hand and the Koran in the other, to inflict death or the faith of Mohammad, or at the best slavery and tribute, upon all who dared to oppose the belief of the Prophet of Mecca" ¹. Jean Jaques Rousseau in his *Lettre a Christophe de Beaumont* (1762), which includes the most hostile views to Islam, sees Islam as a religion preached by the sword and accuses Muslims of being blind in their zeal, inhumane, cruel, blood thirsty and barbarians.² A similar picture of Islam and Muslims is evoked by the Italian Journalist Giovanni Marana in his *Letters Writ by Turkish spy* (1687).³ Such misconception came to be associated with Islam and was easily recognizable as forming part of the fallacy that

was handed down by generations of Western writers and thinkers. The irony is that the average cultured European reader might have derived a basic knowledge of Islam from such writings which deliberately attempt to distort Islamic faith. I am here trying to refute such groundless conception in the light of what we learn from the Qur'anic verses and Prophet Muhammad's Hadith.

First of all, Islam is the religion of tolerance and equality; the only criteria Islam acknowledges for distinction or honor among human beings are spiritual and moral qualities or the degree of Iman (faith) and Taqwa (righteousness): the Qur'an says:

"يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ"
(الحجرات: آية ١٣)

"O people, we have created you of a male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you might know each other. Surely the most gracious of you before God is the most righteous." (49:13)

Thus, worldly considerations such as wealth, status, power, family and education do not count at all in the sight of God unless an individual uses them to follow His guidance and seek His pleasure. To the Muslim, all human beings are equal in humanity for Islam does not permit discrimination in the treatment of other

human beings on the basis of religion or any other criteria. In fact, Islam's insistence on justice and good treatment of all human beings without distinction is so strong that it prohibits Muslims from behaving unkindly or unjustly even with the people of the enemy; the Qur'an says:

"يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاَنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَى
أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَى وَاتَّقُوا " (المائدة : آية ٨)

"O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is closer to piety." (5:8)

In particular, Islam emphasizes neighbourliness and respect for the ties of relationship with non-Muslims. This spirit of tolerance with other human beings regardless of their faith is set in the following Hadiths, among many others:

"All creatures are God's children, and those dearest to God are the ones who treat His children kindly"

"He from whose injurious conduct his neighbour is not safe will not enter paradise".

"The believer is not the one who eats his fill when his neighbour is hungry".

Within this human family, Jews and Christians constitute what Islam terms Ahl- al-

Kitab, that is the People of the Book, or People of the Scripture, as Muslims have a special kind of relationship to them as fellow "Scriptuaries". The tone for such relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book is set in the following Qur'anic verse:

"وَلَا تُحَادِثُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا آمَنَّا بِالَّذِي أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَإِلَهُنَا وَإِلَهُكُمْ وَاحِدٌ" (العنكبوت - آية ٤٦)

"And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better than mere disputation, unless it be with those who inflict wrong and injury, but say, 'we believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is One.'" (29:46)

The verse here states that all Prophets are sent by Allah, the One Almighty God. Therefore, integral to Islamic faith is the belief in all God's books and messengers:

"آمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ لَا يَفْرِقُونَ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ" (البقرة : آية ٢٨٥)

"The messenger believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of faith. Each one believeth in Allah, His angles, His Books, and His Messengers. They make no distinction between one and another of His Messengers." (2:285)

Hence, a Muslim must honour all Allah's Messengers equally. In this way Islam permits Muslims to eat the food of the Christians and the Jews (except what is forbidden, notably pork, which conscientious Jews avoid just as scrupulously as Muslims, and alcohol), and Muslim men are allowed to marry women of these faiths. Following the Prophet's injunctions, the Caliph Omar Ibn EL-Khattab used to ask the rulers about the state of the People of the Book; he only felt at ease when he knew that those people were treated fairly and kindly, for Omar heard the Prophet saying: "He who hurts one of the People of the Book hurts me ... and I am his opponent on the Day of Judgment " (Hadith). The Treaty of the Prophet with the Christians of Najran is one of the best examples of the spirit of tolerance shown by Islam to non-Muslims. The main relevant items of the Treaty guarantee such rights as protection of person, property, places of worship and full freedom of worship. This protection is to be enjoyed by them as long as they do not commit any oppression.

Hence, Islam sets the first charter for the right of citizenship that makes no distinction between people on the basis of their religion, race, nationality, or colour. Indeed, Islam shows an understanding of the unity of mankind in its affirmation of equality regardless of colour and race. This has been set in the Prophet's Hadith:

"No Arab has any superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over a black man, or the black man have any superiority over the white man. You are all the children of Adam, and Adam was created from clay."

In this respect, it is worth quoting an American convert to Islam who was very much impressed during his pilgrimage to Makkah by the spirit of brotherhood among Muslims of different races and colours; he says:

"America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered "white"- but the "white" attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colours together, irrespective of their colour ⁴.

Thus, Islam was the first to recognize human rights and to safeguard personal rights and dignity regardless of colour, race, or religion.

In regard to the notion in the West which propagates the idea that Islam gained ground through force, the Qur'anic verse proves how false this notion is:

"لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ" (البقرة: آية ٢٥٦)

"There is no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from false." (2 :256). The Qur'an also says:

"وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَآمَنَ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلُّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرِهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّى يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ"

(يونس - آية ٩٩)

"If it had been the Lord's will, they would all have believed - all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?" (10:99)

These Qura'nic verses make clear that one's religious belief is a matter of inner conviction and cannot be imposed from outside, nor does any one have the right to force people to believe since God gives each human individual freedom to choose for himself. The verse also challenges those in the West who attempt to account for the expansion of Islam in terms of forcible conversion. The Qur'an further teaches the right way of calling people to Islam:

"ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ"

(النحل - آية ١٢٥)

"Invite them to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious". (16:125)

In this wonderful verse are laid down the principles of religious preaching, which are

good for all time. A Muslim's preaching must be gentle and courteous, his preaching must be done with wisdom and discretion. Again, the verse assures the fact that people who entered Islam chose it willingly , not by force.

The commanders of the Muslim armies were invariably advised to observe these lofty ideals of Islam. For example, after one of the Muslim conquests Caliph Omar promised protection of life, property, places of worship, crucifix, the sick, and full freedom of worship to all. He also forbade the Muslims from taking into possession the places of worship, or compel the vanquished people to give up their faith, or torture them in any way.⁵

An additional proof to which history bears witness that Islam was not imposed by force is the fact that the great expansion of Islamic faith in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and beyond could never be attributed to force. The people of such distant places knew Islam only through Muslim tradesmen and it attracted millions of people in this Far East by the power of its great divine word, its tolerance, its being the first to recognize basic human rights and freedoms.

With regard to war, according to Islam war may be declared basically for the protection and preservation of the fundamentals of Islam and for the establishment of Allah's sovereignty on earth. The main causes for which a war may be

waged by the Muslims are made clear in the Qur'an. First of all, Islam enjoins upon the Muslims to defend themselves against the aggression by the unbelievers:

"الشَّهْرُ الْحَرَامُ بِالشَّهْرِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْحُرُمَاتُ قِصَاصٌ فَمَنْ اعْتَدَى عَلَيْكُمْ فَاعْتَدُوا عَلَيْهِ بِمِثْلِ مَا اعْتَدَى عَلَيْكُمْ" (البقرة - آيه ١٩٤)

"If any one makes aggression upon you, attack him in the same manner as he attacked you." (2:194).

Likewise Allah ordains:

"فَإِنْ قَاتَلُواكُمْ فَاقْتُلُوهُمْ" (البقرة - آيه ١٩١)

"But if they fight you, slay them" (2:191). Islam thus enjoins upon the Muslims not to attack others except in case they have taken initiative in attacking them, as the Qur'an says:

"وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ" (البقرة - آيه ١٩٠)

"Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but begin not aggression, for Allah loveth not aggressors." (2:190)

Muslims are thus exhorted not to attack first. Hence, Islam does not permit the Muslim to take up arms in delivering the message of Islam except in case of aggression by the non-believers. So the Qur'an says:

"لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ"

(المتحنة - آية ٨)

"Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loves those who are just." (60:8).

Even with unbelievers, unless they determined on destroying the Muslims and their faith, Muslims should deal kindly and justly.

It is worth noting here that jihad as an obligation on the individual Muslim and the Islamic society has so often been misunderstood and misrepresented in the West. Jihad is represented as equivalent to the Christian concept of the Crusade or the "holy war". This is totally incorrect, for Jihad simply means, "striving". The first and essential Jihad in Islam is jihad bi nafs or the Muslim's effort at self-improvement and self-purification. This is what Prophet Muhammad called "the greatest jihad. " Another kind of jihad that Islam enjoins on Muslims is the struggle against all kinds of evil and corruption; Muslims are also required to wage war on injustice, tyranny, and oppression. Such jihad fi sabeel Allah (striving in the cause of God) is to be carried by the tongue, by the pen, and if these fail, by the hand as a last resort. Islam absolutely prohibits Muslims to perpetrate injustice, aggression or

harm on others. At the same time, they are not permitted to let themselves or others become the victims of others' injustice or aggression. The Qur'an says:

"أَذِنَ لِلَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ بَأْنَهُمْ ظَلَمُوا" (الحج - آية ٣٩)

"Permission is given to those who fight because they have been wronged." (22:39).

Another Qur'anic verse says:

"وَأَخْرِجُوهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَخْرَجُوكُمْ" (البقرة - آية ١٩١)

"And drive them out of the places where they have driven you out." (2:191).

Thus a Muslim is required to strive with all his energies to bring about the rule of righteousness, freedom and justice.

As regards the breach of a treaty on the part of the enemy, the Qur'an enjoins upon the believers to fight such people and compel them to go back to the treaty they had made with the Muslims. In this connection the Qur'an says:

"الَّذِينَ عَاهَدْتَ مِنْهُمْ ثُمَّ يَنْقُضُونَ عَهْدَهُمْ * فَإِنَّمَا تَنفَضْنَهُمْ فِي الْحَرْبِ فَشَرِّدْ بِهِمْ مَنْ خَلَفَهُمْ" (الأنفال : ٥٦ - ٥٧)

"Those with whom thou didst make a covenant, but they break their covenant ... If thou comest on them in the war, deal with them so as to strike fear in those who are behind them." (8 : 56-57)

Thus, in case the unbelievers perpetrate an outrage upon Islam in one way or another, the Muslims are permitted to deal with them violently. The Qur'an further states that if the non-believers "assail your religion, fight the heads of disbelief in order that they may be restrained" (9:12). At the same time Muslims are ordered to give up fighting in case "the enemy inclines towards peace" (8:61). All such verses prove that war in Islam may be waged not for difference in religion but for the protection of Muslims' life, property, land, and above all, the protection and preservation of the fundamentals of Islam.

Finally, one can say that it is quite clear that Islam enjoins upon Muslims not to be treacherous or transgressors, not to compel people to give up their faith but to give them full freedom of worship. The Qur'an commands explicitly that "there is no compulsion in religion", thus freedom of religion is a fundamental principle in Islam. The rights of man were emphasized by Islam for the first time in the seventh century (AD) when the Christians preached the doctrine that man is born sinful and hence Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for the salvation of mankind. Hence, Islam spread by the power of its great divine word, not by the power of the sword. It remains to say that the spirit of Islam is totally independent of whether Muslims practice it

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faithfully or fail to practice it. The behaviour,
which we observe, of some Muslims does not
correctly reflect Islam; the fault thus lies in the
mentality of such individual Muslims not in the
religion which they profess.

Notes:

Walter Scott. The Talisman, London,
Everyman's, 1967, p.20.

See Ahmed Gunny, Image of Islam in
Eighteenth century Writings, London, Grey
Seal, 1996, pp.128-131.

Ibid. p.118.

Quoted in Robert Traer, "Human Rights in
Islam", Islamic Studies, Vol. 28, No:2, 1989,
p.123.

Tabari : Tarikh, Vol. IV, pp. 159-160.